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## ABSTRACT

Despite the fact that social constructivism is accepted as the guiding theory in Composition, that this theory is the field's theoretical center of gravity, it does not account for, nor explain, the entire writing process. Two major challenges to social constructivism must also be considered in theoretical discussions: (1) the cognitive dimension and (2) the expressionist dimension. The first challenge is a questioning of the fundamental premise upon which the theory is based, that is, that language is essential for and inseparable from thought. Theorists who challenge this premise assert that there are non-verbal aspects of cognition that social constructivist theory fails to account for. Mark Sadoski maintains that thinking in images precedes verbal thinking. Before a person can even begin to write, Sadoski explains, he or she must develop what George Herbert Mead called a "generalized other," a generic audience or other against which we create a persona, a way of presenting ourselves as writers. It is imagination that allows a writer to create a persona to communicate with others, and it is imagination that allows us to visualize a potential communicative act. The second challenge to social constructivism, expressionism, suggests that knowledge can exist on different planes. North (1987), Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) and others have included in their review of viable research methodologies both protocol analysis and textual analysis. These methodologies attest to subjectivist and positivist epistemologies and indeed sanction them. (Contains 13 references.) (TB)

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## Composition Theory: Taking It Apart and Putting It Back Together Again

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*Even though the theory of social constructivism has long served as Composition's theoretical center of gravity, the theory is currently being challenged. This paper addresses the nature of two fundamental challenges and poses the question: Should the field of Composition be guided by a single theory, namely, social constructivism, or should a more comprehensive theory, one that is inclusive of all components of the composing process, be adopted?*

Knowledge as a social construct gained prominence in the scientific community with the publication of Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970) nearly twenty-five years ago. Kuhn posited that scientific development is not a linear build-up of information but is in fact a series of revolutions and subsequent paradigm shifts. He described discovery as a process involving observation, conceptualization, and assimilation to theory and contended that discovery is generally accomplished by more than one person and over a period of time. The concept of a paradigm, according to Kuhn, is crucial for researchers because they can take this basic knowledge for granted and build on it. Knowledge that does not articulate the paradigm is merely fact, so real knowledge is socially constructed. A paradigm shift, as defined by Kuhn, occurs when researchers agree to adopt a new way of perceiving of the nature of that which is being studied, a new core of knowledge to explore through research. Though Kuhn's ideas were grounded in the hard sciences, Hairston, Gere, and numerous others in the field of Composition have attempted to define composition within the Kuhnian construct. The widespread adoption of collaborative learning offers one small piece of

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pedagogical evidence that this theory has largely been accepted in the discipline, not only by researchers, but by practitioners as well.

Despite the fact that social constructivism is accepted as the guiding theory in Composition, that this theory is the field's theoretical center of gravity, it does not account for, nor explain, the entire writing process. The cognitive dimension must still be considered, as must the expressionist dimension.

The theory of social constructivism faces two basic challenges. The first challenge is a questioning of the fundamental premise upon which the theory is based, that is, that language is essential for and inseparable from thought. Theorists who challenge this premise assert that there are non-verbal aspects of cognition that social constructivist theory fails to account for. The notion that language is the essence of thought is the heart of Vygotsky's theory as presented in *Thought and Language* (1986). Whereas Piaget perceived of language as a medium or a vehicle for thought, Vygotsky's perception was that language is the essence of thought and that the origin of language is social in nature. Some of the most notable models of composition, the cognitive models, assume the centrality of language to thought. For example, the notion that language is the basis of thought is key to the 1980 Hayes and Flower model in which the "task environment" (the writing topic and text) serves to activate "long-term memory," which results in a "translation" of memory or thought into language. Similarly, Bereiter and Scardamalia's (1987) "knowledge-telling" and "knowledge-transforming" models simultaneously represent ways of writing and ways of thinking. In these models, writing occurs as the result of a "translation" of memory into language. Bereiter and Scardamalia's knowledge-transforming model implies that higher-level thinking, in other words, writing, occurs when the writer goes beyond simple retrieval of ideas from memory and begins to associate one idea with another; these ideas exist as verbal entities.

Several theorists have come forward to challenge or to attempt to expand the language-equals-thought claim. Alice Brand (1991) has focused on the role of emotion in shaping thought, noting ways in which feeling can powerfully affect cognitive processes. Anger, fear, and other strong emotions can contribute to what she calls "hot cognition." Brand posited that emotions are a significant factor affecting cognitive processes and that any model of writing that assumes a purely logical, rational thought process is incomplete, at best. This argument is supported by new developments in cognitive science. Recent studies show that the emotional system of human beings is quite complex and quite resistant to change (Sylwester, 1994). More neural fibers project from the brain's emotional center into the logical centers than the reverse, "so emotion is often a more powerful determinant of our behavior than our brain's logical/rational processes" (p. 60).

Also countering the language/thought construct is the notion that thinking in images precedes verbal thinking. Mark Sadoski (1992) contends that before we can ever begin to write, we develop what George Herbert Mead called a "generalized other," a generic audience or other against which we create a persona, a way of presenting ourselves as writers. It is imagination that allows a writer to create a persona to communicate with others, and it is imagination that allows us to visualize a potential communicative act. Sadoski suggests that image-making and meaning-making through images are forms of cognition that are crucial for writing and that are non-verbal in form.

It is a relatively easy endeavor to find evidence that non-verbal meaning-making takes place all the time in life situations (Witte, 1992). Meaning is communicated non-verbally in everything from drawing a picture of bananas on a store list to remind the shopper to purchase them, to the intricate symbols used by engineers, mathematicians, and other professionals who utilize graphics or symbols to convey meaning. Stephen Witte's contention is that non-verbal, visual symbols

and awareness of social context, not words alone, facilitate meaning. In essence, verbalization is not necessary for conceptualization; language or speech is not essential for thought.

What each of these theorists asserts is that by limiting thought or cognition to verbal symbols alone, important aspects of cognition, like feelings, emotion, imagination, and other forms of non-verbal meaning-making, are not being accounted for. Hence, the theory of social constructivism is incomplete because it does not account for the multi-faceted, complex process of cognition and, therefore, cannot account for the cognitively driven processes of writing.

The second challenge to social constructivist theory is that it privileges one epistemology, one rhetoric, over all others and is therefore incomplete in accounting for the multiple aspects of composition. Social constructivist theory assumes that all knowledge is socially constructed, that reality and truth exist only through social interaction. Other theorists suggest that this theory limits the reality of composition.

James Berlin (1988) identified three epistemologies that guide the study of composition: subjectivistic epistemology (which yields expressionist rhetoric), positivistic epistemology (which yields cognitive rhetoric), and interactional epistemology (which yields social-epistemic rhetoric). Berlin suggested that the subjectivistic and positivistic epistemologies support the dominant socio-political-economic power structure and are, therefore, inferior to interactional epistemology, which includes all rhetorical elements. Ironically, the rhetorics that Berlin labels expressionist and cognitive have been strongly supported as viable forms by leading theorists in Composition, including Peter Elbow and James Kinneavy. Elbow has posited self-expression as one of the primary aims of rhetoric. In *Writing Without Teachers* (1971), he maintains that the purpose of the teacherless writing group is to provide the initial feedback a writer needs in order to develop an "internal editor"

(a mechanism very much like Sadoski's "generalized other") to guide the mature writer. This internal editor provides a sense of audience and, once established, Elbow suggests, writing becomes a largely internal process. An expressionist rhetoric assumes that truth exists in the individual and, as such, it is not addressed by social constructivist theory.

James Kinneavy (1971) categorized discourse into types, similar to literary genres. He presented four aims of discourse: expressionistic, referential, literary, and persuasive. Expressionistic and referential or informative writing align with Berlin's expressionistic and cognitive rhetorics. However, according to Berlin, expressionistic and referential discourses assume epistemologies that are contrary to social constructivism, yet they remain kinds of writing that must be part of an inclusive theory of composition. The point is that, as Kinneavy claims, all writing occurs in a particular context, for a particular purpose, which means that we cannot limit a theory of composition to one form of rhetoric, not even to the social-epistemic mode that Berlin proposes as socio-economically preferred.

Kristie Fleckenstein (1991) rejects Berlin's privileging of one mode of rhetoric (the social-epistemic rhetoric) and one epistemology (social constructivism) over others. Drawing upon ideas presented in Cobb's Ways of Knowing, she suggests that knowledge can exist on different planes, that we can, in the field of Composition, support multi-planal realities. This position is supported by North (1987), Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) and others who have included in their review of viable research methodologies in the field of Composition both protocol analysis and textual analysis. These methodologies attest to subjectivist and positivist epistemologies and, indeed, sanction them.

It would seem, then, that the theory of social constructivism, which has long served as Composition's theoretical center of gravity, is being challenged on the basis of its limitations, its narrowness. Challengers want a more inclusive theory,

one that will include the cognitive and expressionist, as well as the social aspects of writing, one that will acknowledge the non-verbal aspects of cognition that significantly affect writing. Thomas Kuhn believed that a knowledge community will work to hone and shore up the dominant paradigm of a field until a new theory is introduced and accepted by researchers in the field--a paradigm shift. Social constructivist theory will either have to be expanded to account for the complexities of the composing process, or it will be replaced by a theory that is more inclusive. Or, perhaps, social constructivism will continue as one epistemology that supports a particular kind of rhetoric, allowing for what Fleckenstein calls multi-planal realities in the field of Composition.

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